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SUBJECT: AVIAN INFLUENZA AND THE GOVERNMENT OF VIETNAM -
READY OR NOT...

REF: A) HANOI 2762, B) HANOI 2858, C) HANOI 3009

1. (U) Summary. This cable examines the Government of Vietnam's (GVN) overall strategy toward Avian Influenza (AI) and recent actions taken by GVN to plan for and respond to a potential AI pandemic in Vietnam. The GVN has developed a broad, multi-agency approach following the advice of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), which includes conducting an aggressive nationwide poultry vaccination campaign; attempting to negotiate an agreement with Roche to produce Tamiflu in-country; ordering the state-run media to meet the public's demand for information and news on AI; and creating a national emergency action plan for AI. While the international donor community has generously funded short-term interventions to support GVN's AI preparedness and prevention programs, foreign experts estimate that GVN will require at least USD 120 million of additional donor assistance as well as substantial recurrent costs for medium and long-term AI support for vaccinations; early warning; capacity building; long-term planning; and awareness raising and public information campaigns.

2. (SBU) The leadership of Vietnam clearly recognizes that Vietnam may be prove to be ground zero for an H5N1 pandemic. While Vietnam is beginning to roll out and implement an emergency plan to respond to an influenza pandemic, like most countries, this poor, underdeveloped country is far from ready to sustain a direct hit. Development of strong and sustainable programs to build capacity on both the animal and human health side is an urgent need. Further, support for testing and implementing a useable pandemic influenza preparedness plan is also critical. End Summary.

WHAT IS SUCCESS?

3. (U) The start of the 2005-2006 influenza season in Vietnam is a suitable occasion to ask: Is the GVN adequately prepared for an Avian Influenza (AI) epidemic and what steps can be taken in Vietnam to bolster national and international efforts to detect, contain and limit the potential spread of the H5N1 virus? This cable highlights some of the strengths and weaknesses of the GVN's overall strategy toward AI, including an analysis of Vietnam's draft National Emergency Plan for AI and Human Flu Pandemic (herein EAP), and recent actions taken by GVN to plan for and respond to a potential AI pandemic.

4. (SBU) But what is success? What are the stop-gap measures that might contain an outbreak? The H5N1 virus is now firmly entrenched in poultry in large parts of Asia. Computer modeling in Thailand, however, suggests the possibility, with immediate early aggressive coordinated international intervention, of stopping the further spread of a potential pandemic strain, which is analogous to quenching a small fire with forest-fire potential. Once human-to-human transmission reaches a major metropolitan area, however, the past history of influenza pandemics indicates that the spread of the disease throughout the world can be expected to occur relatively quickly, perhaps in as little as a few weeks. Most health authorities doubt that once a pandemic is underway, it can be stopped, but rather only mitigated or limited. Hence, the best way to prevent a pandemic would be to eliminate the virus from birds and, if so possible, to ensure that any human-to-human outbreak is contained before the virus reaches densely populated urban areas that serve as nodes of international commerce and transportation.

STRONG POLITICAL WILL TO MOBILIZE THE COUNTRY AND COMBAT AI

15. (SBU) Over the past three months, the authorities in Vietnam have demonstrated an increasing level of seriousness, commitment and action to prevent and, if necessary, control an AI epidemic. As reported (ref A), responsibility for AI has risen to the Office of the Prime Minister and the chain of command has been streamlined. This heightened concern follows more than a year of line-agency efforts but little success in implementing an integrated, inter-agency AI campaign as advised by WHO, FAO and other concerned parties who were advising the GVN to take more aggressive action.

16. (SBU) The Vietnamese Communist Party apparatus, which is often characterized by single-minded agendas and sluggish response to international trends, has begun to mobilize "all government resources and the people" to combat the threat of AI. In October, the Party Central Committee called in senior Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) officials and later issued a directive instructing lower level administrative units to implement AI prevention measures. This is important as mobilization at the local level requires political pressure through the party organs. Meanwhile, the Prime Minister has tasked the Ministry of Culture and Information to focus the government-controlled mass media and public information systems on AI awareness raising and to provide the public with timely information on AI outbreaks, illnesses and deaths.

17. (U) Following the advice of WHO and FAO, the GVN has developed a broad, multi-agency approach with a focus on immediate short-term measures. This includes conducting an aggressive nationwide poultry vaccination campaign; attempting to negotiate a landmark agreement with Roche to produce Tamiflu in-country; ordering the state-run media to meet the public's demand for information and news on AI; and drafting a national emergency action plan for AI.

AGGRESSIVE POULTRY VACCINATIONS - THE FIRST LINE OF DEFENSE

18. (SBU) In the Mission's discussions both within and outside the Government, the consensus is that the H5N1 virus could be virtually eliminated from domestic poultry populations in Vietnam. Despite the preponderance of small, backyard operations with a mixing of poultry species and frequent human contact, a comprehensive poultry vaccination program that is sufficiently funded could work. In countries with similar poultry production systems to Vietnam, such as China, such vaccination programs appear to have been effective in outbreak areas.

19. (SBU) However, Vietnam would need a sustained vaccination program that reaches enough of the poultry population, particularly asymptomatic ducks, for the virus to die out in the general poultry population. The threshold could be as low as 70 percent of the population vaccinated. The GVN's announced target is 85 percent. At the same time, GVN would need to establish a system to identify and stop isolated cases from spreading as the vaccination program winds down. Therefore, farmers need to be encouraged to implement biosecurity measures such as decontamination of their poultry areas, not to mix domestic poultry species and to keep ducks from ranging freely. These biosecurity measures would minimize new outbreaks and make effective response much easier.

110. (U) Continued technical assistance from outside experts would be helpful in strengthening Vietnam's AI control program. However, lack of long-term funding, especially for the recurrent and potential compensation costs, appears to be a more serious need. The GVN requires funding to support the cost of vaccination workers, equipment and supplies and to compensate farmers when culling of poultry is required. Traditionally, these costs have fallen to the GVN rather than supported by the donors.

111. (SBU) As reported previously (ref C), the first phase of MARD's nationwide poultry vaccination campaign targeting high-risk bird populations has been completed in 50 of 64 provinces in Vietnam. Meanwhile, the GVN has temporarily banned all imports of live poultry, ornamental birds and their unprocessed (uncooked) products. (NOTE: We are attempting to persuade GVN that there is no scientific basis or human health benefits to ban poultry products from sources without an H5N1 virus problem, such as in the United States).

MINISTRY OF PUBLIC HEALTH - STRENGTHING THE WEAKEST LINK

112. (U) Although still modest, the GVN has taken pro-active measures for early detection of AI in humans at provincial and district-levels, effectively shortening the previous amount of time taken to detect and respond to an AI outbreak, or reputed outbreak, in rural areas of Vietnam.

Recently, the Ministry of Health (MOH) released an action plan to address a pandemic, which ordered hospitals to begin preparing for the possibility of admitting AI victims and to set up temporary hospitals, if needed. The press has also announced that the MOH will work with the military and police forces to contain an AI outbreak (ref C). Most importantly, the MOH has been more forthcoming in recent months in sharing information on possible AI-related human deaths and illnesses to the WHO and international community. This is a marked change from the more guarded attitude regarding prompt reporting of incidents a year ago.

13. (U) The GVN's enhanced, quick response capability on the animal side was demonstrated the week of November 7 in Bac Giang Province in northern Vietnam, where "drastic measures" were taken to contain AI outbreak in three communes. According to "Tuoi Tre News," immediately after the discovery of AI in the poultry population, the province instructed local authorities to incinerate all poultry in the six infected villages and waterfowl in three communes, carry out strict hygiene and decontamination measures, strictly ban the sale of poultry throughout the province, and vaccinate all poultry. Tuoi Tre also reported that the Chairman of Bac Giang's People Committee ordered strict monitoring of 200 people in the infected areas who are currently sick (symptoms unknown), and to quarantine those who begin to show signs of fever. (Note: Secondary sources indicate that some of the chickens that died were vaccinated about 10 days before the incident.)

14. (SBU) Despite these positive measures, the GVN - and the MOH in particular - suffer from institutional challenges associated with non-decentralized, linear governance systems. We believe the GVN will face significant challenges in its efforts to form multi-agency task forces and on-the-ground mobile response teams comprised of animal health, public health and market police units.

TAMIFLU FOR VIETNAM? -----

15. (U) The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) has reported that Vietnam will become the first country to produce Tamiflu under a license agreement with Roche and that production in Vietnam would begin in two months. Nevertheless, a recent discussion between Minister of Health Tran Thi Chung Chien and the Ambassador (ref D) made clear that so far Roche has not agreed to license Vietnam to produce Tamiflu. MOH sources confirm that the GVN has not received permission. According to a recent New York Times article, Roche has entered negotiations with roughly eight of the 50 or so countries interested in negotiating a licensing agreement. Roche reportedly confirmed that it was in talks with Vietnam to provide the finished active ingredients for Tamiflu. (Note: Roche relies on a relatively rare Chinese spice, star anise, to make about two-thirds of the rare shikimic acid. Star anise happens to be the special ingredient used in Hanoi's most famous dish, "pho bo" or beef noodle soup.)

16. (SBU) The Vietnam Pharmaceuticals Administration Department Director Cao Minh Quan estimates Vietnam needs to stockpile 25 million doses of Tamiflu in the event an AI pandemic (reftel Hanoi B). The WHO has pledged to immediately provide 3 million Tamiflu capsules (or 300,000 courses of 10 tablets) if an AI epidemic occurs in Vietnam and, the press has also reported that Taiwan has donated 600,000 capsules. According to the BBC report, Roche also agreed to sell Vietnam 25 million capsules, enough to treat 2.5 million people. The report further states that Vietnam will ultimately have the capacity to produce up to 20 million Tamiflu capsules a year, which could also be sold to other countries in the region.

17. (SBU) Dr. Hans Troedsson, Chief Representative of the WHO in Vietnam, believes that a more pressing concern for GVN is how to distribute Tamiflu stocks effectively.

A HUMAN AI VACCINE? -----

18. (SBU) On November 8, the Minister of Health also asked the Ambassador for U.S. help in finding a company to work with Vietnam to produce a human vaccine against AI, as discussed with HHS Secretary Leavitt in October.

GVN EMERGENCY ACTION PLAN FOR AI - A GOOD START -----

19. (SBU) GVN has developed a draft Emergency Action Plan for AI and Human Flu Pandemic (EAP), which is dated September 2005 but has not been officially approved nor shared publicly. The 63-page draft EAP is comprehensive, though it needs to be supported by more technical protocols (e.g. quarantine and disinfection is ordered, but no specific guidelines are provided). The draft EAP contains

guidance for responding to various outbreak scenarios. It includes immediate recommendations for procurement of veterinary and medical supplies and budgets for procuring minimum stockpiles of personal protective units, chemical disinfectants, antibiotics and Tamiflu. The plan contains some discussion of how GVN's Tamiflu stockpile will be transported and administered, although again specific details are lacking.

120. (SBU) The draft EAP calls for all government offices, resources and people to be mobilized in the fight against the threat of an AI epidemic. The plan directs each line ministry and province to develop its own Action Plan for AI, while each provincial health department is to submit a detailed plan to the respective provincial People's Committees.

121. (SBU) While the draft EAP provides broad instructions to investigate, monitor and prevent the spread of an AI epidemic, the document falls short in details that could assist provinces should they be required to implement such guidelines. For example, the document states that "strict preventative measures such as Tamiflu should be taken by medical staff and other high risk people," but there is no discussion for who exactly will administer limited Tamiflu stocks and who precisely shall receive priority treatment.

122. (SBU) There are only a limited number of well-trained epidemiologists in Vietnam who could be called upon to monitor, analyze and respond should more than a few dozen AI cases occur simultaneously. A general lack of well-trained technical and administrative staff at provincial levels will further challenge efforts by authorities to develop and execute effective AI action planning at provincial and local levels.

INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY EFFORTS TO BOLSTER GVN'S AI STRATEGY

123. (U) The GVN's AI response planning, including the draft EAP, has received support from the international donor community. GVN is working with FAO and the World Bank to restructure the poultry industry while the WHO and the United States are supporting GVN to develop an H5N1 vaccine. The UNDP/WHO/FAO AI Program, which received funding from the USG and other bilateral donors, is fully funded for short-term AI activities. However, UNDP estimates at least USD 120 million of additional donor assistance as well as substantial recurrent costs is needed for long-term AI planning and response (ref C).

Given the number of donors that want to assist, more intra-donor coordination will be required to reduce the burden on the GVN and allow decision-makers to focus on actual implementation rather than coordination. The UNDP is currently recruiting a coordinator to help in this donor coordination effort.

124. (U) The UNDP/WHO/FAO AI Program Team believes there are five priorities for international support, namely: 1) Vaccinations; 2) Early Warning; 3) Capacity Building; 4) Long-Term Planning; 5) Awareness Raising and Public Information. The USG currently funds activities in all five areas.

CONCLUSION

125. (SBU) The leadership of Vietnam clearly recognizes that Vietnam may be prove to be ground zero for an H5N1 pandemic. While Vietnam is beginning to roll out and implement an emergency plan to respond to an influenza pandemic, like many countries, this poor, underdeveloped country is far from ready to sustain a direct hit. Development of strong and sustainable programs to build capacity on both the animal and human health side is an urgent need. Further, support for testing and implementing a useable pandemic influenza preparedness plan is also critical.

MARINE